

The last resort of the EU fighting refugees in Greece—armed force and COVID-19

By Katerina Selin
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“The use of armed force is there as a last resort.” This statement was made in February 2016, half a year after the beginning of the European refugee crisis. Frauke Petry, then chairperson of the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD), demanded that police “use firearms if necessary” to prevent refugees, men, women and children, from entering German territory.

At that time, politicians and the media hypocritically expressed their outrage. Four years later, the order to shoot at Europe’s borders has become a reality. Greek soldiers not only used tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets, but also live ammunition against refugees stranded in the no-man’s-land between the two neighbouring countries, Greece and Turkey.

The WSWS reported on the brutal war against the refugees in March. In a detailed background research from May 8, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* has substantiated allegations made against the Greek government.

The murder of Muhammed Gulzar

On March 4, the 42-year-old Pakistani Muhammed Gulzar was struck by a bullet on the border along the Evros River and died a few minutes later. Research teams from Forensic Architecture, Bellingcat and Lighthouse Reports and *Der Spiegel* have evaluated eyewitness reports, video material and an autopsy report and investigated the course of events.

After the Turkish government opened the border in early March, thousands of refugees traveled to the Evros to enter the European Union, including Gulzar and his wife Saba Khan, 38. Gulzar had lived continuously in Greece since 2007, where he learned the language and repaired fireplaces for a local company. Having fallen in love with Saba Khan, he flew to Pakistan to marry her in January and planned to return to Greece with his wife.

They spent the night in a meadow in the border region, together with other refugees. On the day of his murder, Gulzar tried his luck one more time and approached the border fence, where he spoke to soldiers in Greek. He was then hit by a fatal shot. The report shows in detail that the border guards regularly fire live ammunition. According to analyses and witnesses, at least two Syrian refugees had already been shot dead and dozens seriously injured while crossing the Evros border.

A Greek officer, a member of a special army unit on the

border, *Der Spiegel*, “We fired both blank and ammunition.” The Greek military leadership had given a green light for the use of ammunition, he says.

As expected, the government headed by the right-wing Nea Dimokratia (New Democracy, ND) denied the allegations and spoke of “fake news.” In an official statement the government defended Greece’s “right to protect its borders.” Its denial is a feeble attempt to preserve appearances for the EU. The soldiers who shoot down desperate refugees are not operating on their own authority, nor are the police officers who carry out illegal “pushbacks” and deport refugees back across the border at night.

There is a definite purpose behind the anti-refugee policy in Greece. It goes back to decisions taken not simply at Evros or in Athens, but rather in Brussels and Berlin. As acrid clouds of tear gas still hung over the border area, the president of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen (CDU), rushed to the Aegean Sea and praised Greece as “Europe’s shield.” She gave Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis carte blanche to deter and repel refugees, promised up to 700 million euros in support and strengthened the EU border agency Frontex.

After the *Der Spiegel* article, some members of the European Parliament, including politicians from the Greens, the SPD and the Left Party, felt compelled to request an investigation by the EU Commission, a well-known procedure used to cover up their crimes. “The fatal shot on Europe’s border,” as *Der Spiegel* titled its report, is the consequence of the war being waged by the EU against refugees, supported just as aggressively by the Social Democratic, Green and “left” parties as by the nominal right-wingers.

Following the EU’s deal with Turkey in 2015, backed in Greece by the pseudo-left Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left), a regime of terror has been established in southern Europe aimed at deterring refugees. Millions of people face the alternative of drowning in the Mediterranean or vegetating in one of the overcrowded camps on the Aegean Islands.

“The corona virus is our biggest concern”

The situation is exacerbated by the prospect of COVID-19 infection when the coronavirus hits the camps. On Tuesday, the Greek health authority said that two newly arrived refugees had tested positive but had no symptoms. Health workers had

checked nine randomly selected refugees, out of a total of 70 who arrived on the island of Lesbos last week and were quarantined in a facility as a precaution.

Instead of alleviating conditions in the coronavirus crisis the government has tightened up its policy against refugees. One week ago, the Greek parliament passed a new immigration law, which creates additional hurdles for asylum procedures and facilitates the detention and persecution of refugees. While the right of asylum in Greece has not been in effect for some time, it was officially suspended by Mitsotakis on March 1. Although this violates EU law, the move was approved in Brussels.

The ND currently has a majority in parliament and was able to enforce the law without the support of Syriza (whose deputies quit the chamber before the vote) and the other parties. Syriza's toothless criticism of parts of the bill was a predictable manoeuvre aimed at disguising its anti-refugee agenda. When the army attacked people with tear gas on the Evros border, the leader of Syriza, Alexis Tsipras, backed Mitsotakis and bragged about the record of his own government in confronting refugees.

Given the growing risk of infection in the notorious Moria camp on Lesbos, where 20,000 people are crammed together, refugees have started to take their protection into their own hands. In mid-March they founded the group "Moria Corona Awareness Team." Its spokesman is 30-year-old pharmacist Deen Mohammad Alizadah, who fled Afghanistan with his family in 2018 and has been living in Moria since November 2019.

"The coronavirus is our biggest concern," he said in an interview with the German *taz* newspaper last Tuesday. "An outbreak would be very dangerous here and would infect many people in a short time. The most important precaution is physical distance, as is being tried all over the world. This is completely impossible here."

They founded their team because "there was no official help to deal with the pandemic—not even information. We wanted at least to do what we could to protect ourselves." The 40 team members, refugees from six different countries, are active in the camp three times a week to help and educate those incarcerated, despite the adverse conditions.

On May 10 the Corona Awareness Team sent a letter to the EU, the governments of EU countries and the public, the second letter within a few months. They are outraged at the inaction and silence of politicians so far.

"We ask: Are we not worth getting an answer while so many people talk about Moria and a German minister even called it 'Europe's shame'?" This refers to the German Development Minister Gerd Müller (CSU), who made the statement earlier this month merely to put in a nutshell what the desired result of EU policy is.

"It is more than two months now that this and other camps faced the Corona Crisis without any assistance. We were on ourselves and tried to help ourselves as good as we could."

Camp inmates still only have "three hours of water every day," the letter continues. They are demanding aid in solving the "most burning issues," such as water, trash, insulation, food supply, hygiene and disinfection, fire protection, security and education.

The situation is also worsening in other camps. In the overcrowded camp on the island of Samos, 7,000 people live in a former military facility designed for around 650 people. At the end of April huge fires broke out again and 500 refugees lost their homes and belongings.

The announcement that several EU countries would accept a few dozen or hundred refugee children can only be seen as mockery. At the beginning of April, the German government promised to accept 50 refugee children at special risk of infection from the virus. But even this ridiculous number was a bluff as it soon turned out. Of the 47 children and adolescents who arrived in Hanover on April 18, none was on a list of those with previous illnesses drawn up by aid organisations. Instead, almost half of them had relatives in Germany and therefore a legal right to family reunification.

The refugees' demands must be urgently met and in particular all those with pre-existing health conditions, especially women and children, immediately evacuated from the camps. The experience of recent years, however, has shown that appeals to governments and the EU are useless and deceptive. For the ruling elites, the millions of refugees are merely an annoying by-product of their military policies—collateral damage that needs to be contained and, when necessary, eliminated. At best, the ruling class uses the refugees as a scapegoat, thus spreading the poison of nationalism and racism.

The appeal of the Moria refugees will fall on deaf ears in the political and corporate elite in Europe. The appeal must be directed to the international working class, which is being forced back to work as governments seek to open up economies at great risk to human lives. Workers in Europe, regardless of their origin, must urgently set up protection and action committees to advance their own perspective against the deadly "last resort" policy of the EU: the unification of refugees and workers across Europe and worldwide against the capitalist EU and for the creation of a United Socialist States of Europe.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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